

7th International Human Rights Education Conference
University of Chile, Santiago, 12 December 2016
Opening Remarks by Dr Sev Ozdowski AM

Welcome everyone to the 7th International Human Rights Education Conference.

It is a great pleasure to be here in Santiago de Chile. Many thanks to the University of Chile for hosting this important conference.

Allow me to acknowledge the members on this distinguished opening ceremony panel: Prof. Ennio Vivaldi Vejar, President of the University of Chile; Prof. Davor Harsic, Dean of Faculty of Law; Ms Lorena Fries, Sub-secretary of Human Rights, Ministry of Justice; and Dr Cecilia Medina, Chilean human rights heroine who today is to be awarded the title of Emeritus Professor for her lifetime work for human rights.

My particular welcome goes to all the people who worked so hard to make this conference possible and especially to the convenor of the 7th IHRE conference Prof. Mirna Villegas, Head of the Centro de Derechos Humanos. Well done – without you this conference would not have happened! Also thanks to members of the Advisory Committee and to Ms Lea Newfarmer and her team who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that we have a well organised, welcoming conference.

My warm welcome also goes to those who convened previous conferences. We have here with us previous conference convenors, Prof Bogdan Szlachta of Cracow, Prof Mab Huang of Taipei, Prof John Mubangizi of Durban and Prof Claudio Grossman of Washington DC. Also a warm welcome to those who have attended previous conferences - and I see a number of you here in the audience. As I cannot name all of you, allow me to give a special mention to Dr Reinhild Otte of the Council of Europe and Prof Boguslawa Bednarczyk of the Jagiellonian University.

Last but not least my special welcome goes to young people, students and volunteers. The future of human rights is in your hands.

The timing of the conference is not accidental.

December is a very special month for the human rights movement. 10 December 1948 is the birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration recognized, in international law, that human rights are universal and apply to everyone, everywhere and always.

It declared that all people are born free and equal in rights and provided certain basic standards such as: right to life, liberty and security; right to freedom of opinion and expression; right to family and equal rights in marriage; right to own property; and right to elect and participate in government. After 68 years it remains as one of humanity's greatest achievements and is a key educational tool.

Now allow me to introduce myself and summarise the background of the International Human Rights Education Conferences.

I was born in communist Poland after World War II. This is where my commitment to human rights education began to form. Then, after I left Poland, it continued to develop through the refugee experience, and finally during my professional life in Australia where my professional life focussed on the advancement of human rights and on policy of multiculturalism.

Because of my Australian experience, I decided that promotion of human rights culture is of particular importance in societies that are linguistically and ethnically diverse. As you would probably know about 50% of Australians are either the first or second generation migrants

Therefore when conceptualizing these conferences a particular focus was put on human diversity and on the role played by concepts such as justice, equality and democracy in the management of such diversity. This is because any culturally diverse society needs standards that determine working relationships between different groups as well as to empower individuals.

Human rights provide an internationally recognized set of secular standards that are universal and apply to all peoples regardless of their culture, religion, gender or any other characteristic. Human rights framework thus provides the agreed minimum standards of human decency and builds peace and understanding.

My experience as Australia's Human Rights Commissioner added another factor of importance that shaped the origin of these conferences that needs to be mentioned. In 2001 I decided to conduct an inquiry into the mandatory system of immigration detention. I was aware however, that there were a number of earlier inquiries that reported significant human rights breaches, but were not acted upon.

The key question I was thus confronted with was the question about how to make my inquiry effective and deliver a change. After considerable deliberations I decided to focus the inquiry on children and to adopt a methodology that broadly involved the public through public hearing, media reports and publicised visits to detention centres.

The inquiry was designed as a battle for the hearts and minds of Australians and as intended resulted in a major change in public opinion. When I started the inquiry in 2001 some 65% of Australians were in support of mandatory detention policies; when the inquiry was completed some 65% of Australians were of the view that children and their families should not be subject to long term mandatory detention. The net outcome was that the government of the day released children and their families from Australian detention centres.

The inquiry has yet again demonstrated the importance of Lord Dicey writing about the linkage between law and public opinion. I have learned that human rights education forms public opinion that in turn impacts positively on government human rights practices. But lack of public support for human rights sets limits for human rights culture and governments will not go further than people allow it.

Another factor was that in 2006 I became President of the Australian Council for Human Rights Education which developed a program to teach children at schools about human rights. Going to different schools, I have found that although children in Australia are very interested in human rights, they have very little factual knowledge about them.

All of the above factors led to the establishment of the 1st International Human Rights Education Conference in Sydney in November 2010. The conference aimed to bring about change through educating the public about the human rights standards, to establish a marketplace for exchange of human rights education ideas and to establish a solid training ground for future human rights leaders.

These conferences therefore aim to not only be limited to human rights lawyers, but to ensure participation of a broad spectrum of people working in the human rights field, including: educators, non-government organizations, government officials and others. The aim is to broaden the teaching about human rights and to make human rights education a major pillar of modern civil society.

I am particularly pleased about the 7th Conference taking place in Santiago de Chile. There are three key reasons:

First, the conference is finally held on the South American continent. It means that the International Human Rights Education conferences have already visited all continents – starting in Australia, then going to Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.

Second, the International Human Rights conferences clearly contributed to the creation of the human rights movement world-wide. In fact, the Santiago conference is evidence that we have succeeded in building a mass movement for human rights education. A movement that builds bridges between people of different religions, cultures, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations and other statuses. We have contributed to world peace.

Third, I visited Chile on a human rights mission in August 1986. I remember – Chile was then a very different place - the ever present police and military everywhere; long meetings at Vicaria de la Solidaridad at Plaza de Arms 444, meeting with human rights activists at Academia Humanismo Cristiano at the Cathedral and elsewhere, and visits to prisons to meet political prisoners. In fact, before coming here I checked my 1986 calendar for the names of people I met. The calendar only contained the names of foreign diplomats and various addresses, but no names of people I met. There was a good reason for this omission.

I still cherish a little copper dove, a symbol of peace, given to me by political prisoners and their requests made in quiet but determined voices – tell the world what is happening to us here. I have the copper dove with me and will give it to the Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos.

It is pleasing to be here in Santiago de Chile again and to see how it has changed. It is also pleasing to see that Chile has learned from its experience with military dictatorship and now is a world leader in human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen – please use this conference to learn from each other’s experience and spread the human rights message across the world.

Allow me to finish my remarks by quoting the patron saint of human rights education Nelson Mandela. He said:

‘No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion.

People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than it's opposite.’

I wish you a very successful conference.

I hope that you will arrive back home with fresh ideas and new energy to advance human rights for all.

Thank you.